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Exploring ‘events’ as an information systems research methodology

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Exploring “Events” as an Information Systems Research Methodology

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ABSTRACT

In this article we build upon existing research and commentary from a variety of disciplinary sources, including information systems, organisational and management studies, and the social sciences that focus upon the meaning, significance and impact of “events” in the information technology, organisational and social context. Our aim is to define how the examination of the event is an appropriate, viable and useful information systems methodology. The line of argument we pursue is that by focusing on the “event” the researcher is able to more clearly observe and capture the complexity, multiplicity and mundanity of everyday lived experience. An inherent danger of existing traditional “event” focused studies and “virtual” ethnographic approaches is the micromanagement of the research process. Using the notion of “event” has the potential to reduce methodological dilemmas such as this without effacing context (Peterson, 1998, p. 19). Similarly, in this article we address the overemphasis upon managerialist, structured and time-fixated praxis that is currently symptomatic of information systems research. All of these concerns are pivotal points of critique found within event-oriented literature regarding organisations (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004; Peterson, 1998).

Keywords: interpretivism; online behavior; postmodernism

INTRODUCTION

An examination of event-related theory within interpretative disciplines directs our focus toward the more specific realm of the “event scene.” The notion of the “event scene” originated in the action based (and antiacademy) imperatives of the situationists and emerged in an academic sense as critical situational analysis. Event scenes are a focus for contemporary critical theory where they are utilised as a means

of representing theoried inquiry in order to loosen the restrictions that historical and temporally bound analysis imposes upon most interpretative approaches. The use of event scenes as the framework for critiquing established conceptual assumptions is exemplified by their use in *CTheory*. In this journal’s version and articulation of the event-scene poetry, commentary, multivocal narrative and other techniques are legitimated as academic forms. These

various forms of multidimensional and multivocal expression are drawn upon to enrich the understandings of the “event” to extricate its meaning and to provide a sense of the moment from which the point of analysis stems.

The objective of this paper is to advocate how information systems research can (or should) utilise an event scene oriented methodology. The paper is organised as follows: we begin by presenting the theoretical background and definitions of “event scenes” and the “event.” We do this as a means of illustrating how events capture multidimensional and multivocal forms of expression. The significance of this method is that it is a nonlinear and less time focused approach that has the potential to challenge the managerialist, structured and time-fixated praxis that is currently dominating information systems research and development. In the next section we illustrate why and how event oriented methods advocate including elements of illogical asemiosis of experience that eschews the application of management process and articulates arhythmic patterns of life, including political and cultural experience. We then argue there is a need to utilise consumption based approaches in information systems research away from traditional production-based systems understandings. Finally and most importantly, utilising an event-based focus in information systems can challenge existing constructs that perpetuate mainstream regimes of power by widening the boundary of what we understand as “the system.”

WHAT ARE EVENTS AND EVENT SCENES?

The whole life of those societies in which modern conditions of production prevail presents itself as an immense accumulation

of spectacles. All that once was directly lived has become mere representation. (Debord, 1994, Thesis 1)

In this paper we present a sample of literature concerning event-oriented approaches, especially those inspired by the situationists, in order to consider the more specific representational issues found in the specific praxis of the “event scene.” We build upon Peterson’s (1998) literature review that offers a taxonomy of organisational events to develop a critical debate regarding the relationships of events to organisations. The event scene is the direct descendant to the situationism’s act of *détournement*, in which significant and insignificant elements of observations are isolated and inserted into new and unexpected contexts. *Détournement* is most readily explained with examples such as found art and the work of artists such as Tracey Emin that includes her Curriculum Vita (CV) presented as a framed piece and more recently an abusive text message sent to a fan. A majority of Emin’s work places the mundane in a formal environment in unexpected ways, forcing the viewer to (hopefully) reconsider their position and view the subject of the works in new ways. As a necessarily obtuse explanation of this tactic, Debord and Wolman (1956) describe *détournement* as being “less effective the more it approaches a rational reply” to the cultural situation it critiques. The situationist’s invocation for obscurity is a political resistance to the likelihood of mainstream recuperation — of being made irrelevant by becoming commodified. Event scenes are a mechanism utilised by contemporary critical theory in order to loosen the restrictions of historical and temporally bound analysis that are a consequence of most interpretive methods.

Our emphasis is primarily interpretative and contrasts with the growing use of *Complex Event Processing* (Mohamed, 2006; Niblett & Graham 2005). This theorisation of the event has developed from a computer science and processual perspective. While the founding rationale for this approach could arguably be seen as similar to our own, its implementation and general focus of attention differs significantly.

The general theoretical orientation of this work is drawn from the situationism of Debord's (1994) *Society of the Spectacle* (Albright, 2003), de Certeau (1988), Lefebvre (1992) and a cautious reading of Baudrillard's work (1988, 1998) regarding simulation and hyperreality. We acknowledge that this selection is a somewhat distorted representation of a situationist work. Debord and Baudrillard, for example, have been claimed as being at odds with one another intellectually at various points in their careers, as well as with the general development of situationism (Albright, 2003). Debord's (1994) identification of the spectacle informs the meaning of the event scene used in this paper and assists in justifying our position that it is a legitimate approach to researching contemporary cultural and organisational phenomena. Baudrillard's (1993) argument regarding the balance between the mundanity of everyday life and moments of tension also positions the observation of event-driven culture.

In the face of the threats of a total weightlessness, an unbearable lightness of being, a universal promiscuity and a linearity of processes liable to plunge us into the void, the sudden whirlpools that we dub catastrophes are really the thing that saves us from catastrophe. Anomalies and aberrations of this kind recreate zones of gravity and

density that counter dispersion. (Baudrillard, 1993, p. 69)

In contemporary culture, even for the Frankfurt School of Critical Studies two generations ago, "diversion, distraction, and amusement had become the norm." (Hoover & Stokes, 1998). Attention to the minuscule of everyday life is both the norm of everyday life as well as being the representational tactic employed within the event scene (Peterson, 1998, p. 20).

The focal point of the event could be claimed as a complex potlatch; it is no coincidence that *Potlatch* was a key journal that inspired original situationist thought. The event is the mundane, the integrative blending of moments that constitute everyday life, the nonlinearity of experience, the illogic of expectations, the indeterminate acceleration and deceleration of personal temporality and the moments of the unexpected or unforeseen (Albright, 2003; Debord, 1994; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004; Peterson, 1998, p. 24; Plant, 1997, p. 236). The researcher is politically obliged within this framework to represent the event (any event) as an event scene—the excised moment of observation and experience captured and individually emphasised by them (Peterson, 1998, p. 20). Representing human experiences in the context of the "immediate" supports our claim that research methods that are less dependent upon historical and temporal references have the potential to reveal alternative and important understandings of information systems development and use.

EVENTS AND COLLECTIVE MEANING

Collectively considered together, "events" are the combination of situa-

tions and occurrences that have persistent significance to a social group as shared meaning-making and identity-making constructions (Urry, 2002). The examination and interpretation of events and their representation as event scenes is not a new research enterprise. Its foundations lie in classical historical analysis, including the documentation of significant moments of humanities' progress through time (see Burke's 1978 mainstream *détournement*). As Burke (1978) acknowledges through his own somewhat unconventional view of history, an event offers different meaning to different social groups that reflect divergent genealogies of events. Within information systems research, attention to structure and process produces a lack of sensitivity to the everyday and constant interplay of events. Plant (1997, p. 12) also provides an indefinite definitional basis for the spectacle when she identifies it as the "materialisation of ideology." In the broadest sociological sense, contemporary events include reality television programmes, sports fixtures and annual festivals. All of these have been made the focus of theoried examination through a variety of methodological lenses. In an information systems context events exist in a variety of forms, including version change, system failure (in its many well-documented permutations), new personnel and new cohorts of "users" (such as the annual induction of higher education students to virtual learning environments). Events in this way are imprecisely situated within a historical, temporal, political and locational morass. The logic of information systems *events* is more clearly defined and understood by their shifting interrelationship to one another rather than their position on a Gantt chart, in a timeline, physical location or particular management regime.

It is those events that are shared and recalled (although not necessarily in any linear or logical fashion) as significant referents that engender cultural dynamism and contribute to the perpetuation of social structures. It has been argued by Urry (2002) that events such as wars, inventions, rituals, ceremonies, births and deaths are the core elements in the construction of shared meaning and are vital for the establishment of individual as well as social identity. The documentation of past events — or, alternatively, written histories — are significant cultural artefacts that retain collective consciousness in a tangible and objectified manner. Similarly, the documentation of future events in procedures and system designs embed historical, temporal, political and locational bias and assumptions that are effaced (or at least obscured) by the internal "logic" of documentation practice and the "structure" of a system's design. These realisations are implied as central concerns for the situationists with their criticism of contemporary art and visual representation (Plant, 1997). Situationist thought, which by implication informs the event-driven perspective more generally, understands that the indirect experience of the event encapsulates a hidden but mediating representation that contributes to the obfuscation of the influences that the holders of "real" power have in contemporary society (Albright, 2003). The mechanism by which events or other units of enquiry are represented and labeled through a seemingly neutral "methodology" is consequently recognised as a powerful (and empowering) aspect of the research process. The embedded political relations found in research-based representations of events also contributes to a wider agenda that preserves the existing structures of mainstream power, whether this be political,

gendered, ethnic or economic. De Certeau (1988, p. xvii) expresses this concern as the marginality of the majority.

Marginality is today no longer limited to minority, but is rather massive and pervasive; this cultural activity of the non-producers of culture, an activity that is unsigned, unreadable and unsymbolized, remains the only one possible for all those who nevertheless buy and pay for the showy products through which a productivist economy articulates itself.

The event that was the attack on New York in September 2001 and its later evolution into the media-driven event scenes of “9/11” a year later is one indication that the representation of events is a powerful political tool. The difficulty with representational strategies is that they can be used equally by situationists and critics of contemporary culture as well as by the holders of existing power (Albright, 2003; Plant, 1997). Realisation that the political motivations of situationism had itself been recuperated by the mainstream as “witty” ads and ironic play was a pivotal cause in the fracturing and dissolution of the movement. The *Sex Pistols* are one example of this tension. As their manager manipulated mainstream sensibilities to commercial success, the band’s own initial political and social commentary became increasingly questionable. We advocate, in the largely conservative environment of organisational studies, a critical re-examination of what methodology “does” but do not *ad hoc* reject all existing methodological paradigms (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004, p. 235). The issue being critiqued here is the current practice within information system’s research for continuous, but empty, justification and re-iteration of “its” methods. Modernist desire

for self-legitimation obscures recognition of the continuous sequence of interrelated events that *is* the information system in order to emphasise the research activity itself and to legitimate its utility (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004, p. 240). More significantly, debate concerning methodological appropriateness, if we apply the concerns of situationism, obscures examination of the real power holders who benefit from the events that are represented.

A VIEW OF THE EVERYDAY

To dérive was to notice the way in which certain areas, streets, or buildings resonate with states of mind, inclinations, and desires, and to seek out reasons for movement other than those for which an environment was designed. (Plant, 1997)

At first glance the effort to *dériver* (to become a *derivate*, to drift) appears to be the opposite political action called for by the desire to represent, recognise, and respond to the complacency of mundanity. However, the act of *dériver* is better viewed as the political and methodological act of looking beyond the veil of hegemonic expectations in order to see the actuality of use in places and with things. In an information systems context this could be (merely) seen as looking beyond the managerialist and structuralist views of a system (Peterson, 1998). The contemporary seminal example of the act of *dériver* are the unfocused, random and personal actions of the “Web surfer” (Andersen, 1998; Hartmann, 2003). Observation and participation within a system is contextual within a continuous sequence of interrelated events that captures what is actually done on a day to day basis rather than what is expected of individuals.

The role of the everyday within information systems research is, however, only marginally articulated or acknowledged in the majority of seminal information systems literature. Such a paucity of material is despite the significant impact that information systems themselves have upon daily life, both in a workplace context and increasingly in the domestic environment. However, the discussion of everyday life and its critical debates are well covered elsewhere (in other disciplinary contexts) by writers such as de Certeau (1988) and Lefebvre (1992). Both of these authors had also recognised association with situationist thought. De Certeau (1988, p. xviii) in discussing the personal interrelationships of everyday life claims that

statistical investigation remains virtually ignorant of these trajectories, since it is satisfied with classifying, calculating and putting into tables the "lexical" units which compose them but to which they cannot be reduced, and with doing this in reference to its own categories and taxonomies.

These claims can be rightly construed as a critique of quantitative and positivist praxis. The implication in a critique of this type is that these approaches produce their own internal logic that obscures external influences of power upon those people and "things" being tabulated, and who are ultimately affected. De Certeau (1988) argues for the significance of the interrelatedness of everyday life when he claims that "the analysis of the images broadcast by television and of the time spent watching television should be complemented by a study of what the cultural consumer 'makes' or 'does' during this time and with these images." Basden (2005), in examining the works of Dooyeweerd, also claims that

though we cannot theorize scientifically about everyday life, we can understand it philosophically as an integration of the aspects of our experience. In the everyday, all aspects play their proper place to a greater or lesser extent. This is why, for example, it has an important social aspect and a religious (pistic) aspect, as well as a sensory aspect. But it also means that everyday living is not devoid of analytical activity (which is akin to theoretical thinking), though this takes the form of an analytical subject-object relationship rather than a theoretical Gegenstand-relation. This provides a useful foundation for analysing the richness of everyday life, everyday engaged attitudes and tacit knowledge.

The situationist view of the everyday is not, however, celebratory. Situationist association of everyday life with people's oppression and disempowerment largely prohibits this perspective, at least directly. De Certeau's general observations regarding everyday life also reflect this political hesitation.

...our society is characterized by a cancerous growth of vision, measuring everything by its ability to show or be shown and transmuting communication into a visual journey. It is a sort of epic of the eye and of the impulse to read. The economy itself, transformed into a "semicracy", encourages a hypertrophic development of reading. Thus for the binary set production consumption, one would substitute its more general equivalent: writing reading. Reading (an image or a text), moreover, seems to constitute the maximal development of the passivity assumed to characterize the consumer, who is conceived of as a voyeur in a show-biz society. (de Certeau, 1988, p. xxi)

As the indivisible stage of experience, everyday life is the venue for the construction and articulation of events (Peterson, 1998, p. 20). Understanding information systems in this context places them in the realm of everyday life, where they cease to exist in any systematic or singular sense. Information systems (whatever these may be) as an experience of everyday life become (perhaps merely) a surfeit of received information so that “today, the population is subjected to a continuous bombardment of damned stupidities that are not in the least dependent on the mass media” (Debord, 2002, p. 130). Debord (2002, p. 130) sustains this critique by claiming that “information theory straightaway ignores the chief power of language which lies on its poetic level; to compete and supercede.” Information does not have inherent power solely as a consequence of the scale of individual collections (with the Internet being the uber example) but in conjunction with the manner that information is read and reinterpreted; in short, how it is presented and represented.

THE MULTIPLICITY OF EXPERIENCE

The event-based approach is a rejection of the linearity of practice that is assumed within predominant “systems” based approaches. Methods that seek to understand “the system” commence with a series of assumptions that include the belief in an *a priori* presence of a system “merely” because the concentrated accumulation and representations of information is labeled as such. Belief in the systemic nature of everyday life is an agreement of coherence and semiosis that is not borne out by experience. An event-oriented method, in contrast, integrates and recognises the illogical

asemiosis of experience that eschews the application of management process and articulates arhythmic patterns of life (Peterson, 1998). For example, organisational studies of university management would attend to the application of documented policy, the process of committee based decision making and the general hierarchy of authority within a university. An event-oriented approach applied to the same environment may focus on the “hidden” flows of e-mails between colleagues, the use of “chair’s action” for decision making and the day to day solving of problems that contradict documented policy.

Critical and contemporary social studies no longer unwittingly accept the dominant historical accounts of events as the only “truth.” Nor do these perspectives blindly accept the unseen influences of power in the constitution of social phenomena or even identity. Writers such as Baudrillard (1998), Bergson (1910) and Game (1996) have all challenged the linearity of history and have gone so far as to argue for, at least in some cases, the death of history. In this rethinking of history the temporally cemented event — fixed, reified and glorified — is challenged. Raising doubt regarding the “certainty” of specifically identified events is particularly true in relation to the role that history plays as the central parameter of cultural understanding. The exploration of notions of time and space and their philosophical relationships is a central focus in contemporary studies of the social. Time, Bergson argues, has philosophically become spatialised (1910). That is, when time is spatialised it is understood as being able to be touched, seen as having discrete elements or presence and, most significantly, it can be presumed to be represented in this way (Game, 1996). As Game states “the common conception of time is

that it is abstract, linear, and homogenous; homogenous empty time” (Game, 1996, p. 95). It is Bergson’s notion of multiplicity, however, that positions — even anchors — the construction of event scenes and the representation of everyday life experiences. The method of multiplicity, outlined by Bergson, employs dislocation by taking any object and disassociating its different moments, or its different ways of meaning (Game, 1996, p. 92). Bergson’s multiplicity mirrors the political strategy and research method of *détournement* (the disentanglement of cultural products to present new and oppositional meanings). Pulling apart the normality of everyday life plays with the meanings (and understandings) of the single instance and multiple events (their interlocking relationships) (Debord & Wolman, 1956). Bergson is critical of the approach and idea that “the present contains nothing more than the past, and what is found in the effect was already the cause” (Bergson, 1910, p. 15). The influences of historical materialism is readily identified within both qualitative ethnographic works and quantitative longitudinal studies (two methodological approaches that currently find favour within information systems research). Historical materialism presumes that what has preceded is the key relationship and source of understanding. However, for the contemporary moment it is an under theorised enquiry.

CAPTURING THE EVENT WITHIN THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The diverse approaches to systems thinking utilised in the field of information systems necessitates critical engagement with the question of the research position as the actual site of analysis and point of

observation of the event. Systems theory methodologies require a boundary to be placed at the site of analysis (Heylighen, 1998). Encapsulating the subject under examination reduces the endless combinations and interactions of complex systems — the wide range of events — that can be observed. It is at the nexus between advocacy for the need for boundaries and alternatively their permeability that debates regarding the meaning and purpose of information systems research exists. General systems theory applies boundaries in order to present a minimalised but holistic position of analysis (Heylighen, 1998). The bounded conceptualisation of a system exists within the broader continuum of system theory approaches and has been utilised across the information systems field, which ranges from the “hard system/cybernetic” approaches to “soft systems” (see Checkland & Howell, 1998 for a history of systems thinking in information systems development).

Systems operating within organisations are usually considered open in that there is recognition of the dynamic interaction of the system with the surrounding environment (Robbins & Barnwell, 1994). The system’s boundary serves to enclose internal operational elements from those external to the system and environmental conditions which may impact upon the system as a whole. However, the system’s boundary is permeable (Greenhill, 2002). Within the system, information is processually transformed from input to the output stage. Systems developers expect and plan for information taken into a system to be altered in predictable *systematic* ways up to the final point of output, of release from the system. Bundled with this initial assumption, the meanings and purposes associated with specific information are also fixed.

Baskerville and Pries-Heje's (1998) study on the management of knowledge capability and maturity in a small to medium size software development organisation is a pertinent example of the expectations of the systems developers in developing and maintaining fixed meanings within systems. The company Baskerville and Pries-Heje studied experienced difficulties developing organisational and Web-based systems. Assessment of the company's situation was carried out primarily in managerial terms, rather than as a sequence of events, as the employees themselves claim.

I realise that all documents needed to support this, namely customer contract, project presentation, budget and requirements specification, were nowhere, and there were a thousand different meanings within Proventum about how they should look... Today we have as many different contracts as we have employees, because we don't have a template to work from. (Jan in Baskerville and Pries-Heje, 1998, p. 183)

We need to be better at exploiting the knowledge from previous projects, much better, so we don't make the same things again and again and again. (Henrik in Baskerville and Pries-Heje, 1998, p. 183)

Many systems designs rely on the fact that there can be no unsystematic, nonprocessual or unexpected alterations to the *meaning* of information (no unforeseen events). The experience of the system is not regarded as a varied combination of interconnected events but a continuous timeline of neatly packaged and logical actions. In the case of this often cited example, information was seen in management terms to remain static and continuously available to

enable its exploitation in the future. However, from an event-based perspective the purpose and use of the information within a planned system does not necessitate or provide any singular or fixed accumulation of meanings. In place of uniform certainty is an array of interrelated meanings that the user may variously interpret from a system and its usage. It is only the genealogy and association crafted through organisational culture that produces mutually shared understanding of the system. As Wittgenstein observed, there can be no "private language." Understanding and mutual comprehensibility is a joint-action (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004).

The interpretive position offered by Orlikowski & Gash (1994) and Feldman & March (1981) are two examples of the influence of situationism on information systems research. The assertion that information *always* holds multiple meanings challenges any methodological assumption surrounding the construction and representation of meaning that presumes a linear monodimensional process (Baudrillard, 1994). An event-oriented perspective enables the identification of many taken-for-granted positions to be found in current methodological frameworks through the act of *détournement*, and reveals rather than obscures the political environment around which information is manipulated (Baskerville, Travis, & Truex, 1992). The foundational model for information systems was developed within a modernist context and utilises static and linear understanding to the meaning of information. It is only now that we, as participants within a postmodern cultural condition, are able to critique and question the appropriateness of static models of systems models usage.

Generally, analysis of systems operations and information systems utilise the

modernist tradition, which emphasises and restricts understanding through the processes of production (see Alter, 1996; Hirschheim, Klein & Lyytinen, 1995). The information system is represented and understood as a Fordist information “factory.” For example, the system Baskerville and Pries-Heje (1998) explore is a knowledge management system that requires the system output – knowledge – to be managed. The input into the system is garnered from knowledge obtained from new and existing employees on the software programming team. More specifically, new knowledge, meanings and hence inputs that the individuals have in relation to database technology, Internet technology and Web technology are inserted into the system (Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 1998). The management of this knowledge within the monolithic managerial perspective requires information at the input stage to remain deterministically static in order to be both predictable and reusable. The application of this knowledge *may* be required at a later date (as systemic output). Therefore, it must be controlled in terms similar to those of a factory process. The system is valued purely in terms of this restrictive and narrow, but tangible, output. Processual approaches restrict the understanding of a system to an examination of data, its utilisation and manipulation. The goal or objective of the system is reached by asking whether the end product or output is effective and achieves the desired outcomes. Outcomes are generally assessed from a managerial perspective, simultaneously reducing the day-to-day user to a component of the system. Mechanistic positions reflect much of the contemporary information systems thinking (see Alter, 1996; Achterberg, van Es & Heng, 1991; Hirschheim, Klein & Lyytinen, 1995; Morgan & Smircich,

1980). Incorporating the event into systems analysis challenges production driven theorisations by shifting analysis away from production and the privilege of the manager. Consideration of events and the role of less privileged users reduces the dominance of hierarchical and managerial views of the system. Ultimately, the political aim of this perspective is to reposition those who contribute to events *in* the system as owners of that system.

METHODS FOR REVEALING AND REPRESENTING THE EVENT

Much of the methodological challenge that is taken up by event based analysis has been described ad hoc under the rubric – “the postmodern turn” (Brown, 1990, p. 196). Although this “turn” is yet to be fully articulated within the studies of organisations, commentaries such as that of Gergen and Thatchenkery (2004) do justify the turn for further critical work. Although postmodernism has been posited as antithetical to the modernist project, the relationship is not simply a structuralist dichotomy (Lagopoulos, 1993). Foster (1983, p. xi) suggests that the task of postmodernism is to extend the project of modernism by opening “its closed systems to the heterogeneity of texts.” The politically confining aspects of modernist methodology are alternately accentuated, ignored or rejected in the various “postmodern” approaches (Huysen, 1992; Jencks, 1992,). Klotz (1988), in his attempt at reaching a definition of architectural postmodernism — itself a potentially modernist task — provides the basic framework for critical social research. He cites ten defining characteristics of the postmodern experience, ranging from geographic specificity and poetic cultural

constructions to a need for relativism. Recognition of these cultural conditions irrevocably alters the justification of modernist methodology. The recognisable traits of postmodernism all emphasise the irrevocably altered nature of social relations in advanced mainstream capitalism, including what we claim is a surfeit of events. Among other qualities found in Klotz's (1988) definition of postmodernism are the use of fiction in conjunction with function, the ironic "use" of history, the plurality of style, and a movement away from the perceived inevitability of technological progress. Capturing this complex social environment is more readily done through the gaze of the *dérive* — looking at the world of everyday life from the outside — and engaging in *détournement* — tearing down the supposed stability of systems.

The urban form, the visual, a celebration of the mundane, the embodiment of readable messages within material culture items and, obliquely, the increasing importance of entertainment in daily life are all elements of a critical methodology that attempts to understand contemporary social life. The movement away from modernist method and its quantifying concerns has been paralleled with an interest in the study of the popular and — to its extreme manifestation — kitsch (Jameson, 1983). What had been previously dismissed as not worthy of study or as being simply ugly have acquired undiscovered qualities, bringing them into the framework of theoried examination. The academic study of the products in the everyday life of mainstream capitalism, such as tourist's souvenirs and the car, is compatible with the attitudes of the *dérive*.

Examining the mundane "things" of everyday life and their relationship to other "things" also emphasises a shift in focus

from production-based analysis to more consumption-orientated approaches. This is a view which is confirmed by Shields (1992, p. 2), who believes that "in general, the modernist separation of economy and culture has left little room for serious engagement with consumption practices." Consumption-based methods provide a degree of flexibility and encompass a significant part of an individual's social life. Being "out" in the public sphere is to be consuming, not just foodstuffs and fuels, but more intangible items, including events and information. The practice of consuming in advanced capitalist social life has become synonymous with social participation (Derrida, 1978). People's ability to remain social participants is determined by their consumption practices. In this sense consuming events and gazing upon objects are important aspects of everyday life, and by implication the research methodologies concerned with human experience. Consumption encompasses a significant proportion of social life when the supposedly "ordinary" can be viewed both as spectacle and as the parody of spectacle — the unspectacular event.

Within the context of everyday life the consumption of events is sublimated into the realm of the ordinary slipping from political consciousness to reinforce existing power structures. The situationists provide two methodological tactics that support their underlying theoretical and political standpoint: *dérive* and *détournement*. A third methodological tactic was identified by the situationists as the position and action that must be resisted, that of recuperation (being subsumed into the mainstream). Much of the obscurity, complexity and incoherence of the original situationist works was incorporated as a defense mechanism against this counter-tactic. Criticism of later works with

a situationist heritage could also be understood through the realisation of this tactic and proactive resistance. Writings such as Baudrillard's (1998) "postmodernism" and Derrida's (1978) "poststructuralism" are two immediately obvious examples.

There is a tendency to isolate an individual tactic of situationism and celebrate its relevance. Of the three methods this response is most commonly found with the *dérive* and the Web (Andersen, 1998; Hartmann, 2003). However, this methodological isolation is a disservice to the original intent of the situationists. The *Internationale Situationiste* (1958) claim for *détournement*, as "the integration of past or present artistic production into a superior construction of a milieu," continues to have relevance in relation to information systems as an inter-related combination of events that are not constrained by the arbitrary boundary of a documented system. Setting the information system free of unfounded delineation requires the act of the *dérive*. To drift and discern the location of these relevant but distanced events requires the attitude that mirrors Baudelaire's *flâneur* who is not constrained by the conventions that the recuperated information system seeks to sustain and perpetuate upon its hierarchically labeled and systemically controlled users.

Existing examples of event-oriented critiques of information systems are not readily found as printed documents. However, the increasing domestication of information technology acts as an enabling mechanism that brings event-based critique to the Web. These are generally visual and visualisation projects. The *Digital Landfill* project (www.potatoland.org/landfill) takes images and texts from randomly selected Web sites and *détourne*s them into a single image that seems to be "almost" meaning-

ful. Similarly, the home page of *spaceless.com* generates a random selection of images gathered from everyday life that *appears* to be a coherent collection. The semiotic obscurity of the resultant combination of images resists recuperation while standing as a critique of the vast asemiotic information system that is the Web. A more focused use of situationist tactics to develop a critique of an e-commerce system was the ongoing dispute between *etoy.com* and *etoys.com* (Stallabrass, 2003). *Etoy.com* became the vehicle from which "toy war" was launched. This "war" parodied the techniques of on-line business to *détourne* the meaning of e-commerce. The final result of this political engagement was the corporate failure and bankruptcy of *etoys.com*.

However, some Internet art projects reach beyond *détournement* and this is explained by Debord and Wolman's definition of the tactic. "The distortions introduced in the *détourned* elements must be as simplified as possible, since the main impact of a *détournement* is directly related to the conscious or semiconscious recollection of the original contexts of the elements" (Debord & Wolman, 1956). This tactic is consequently not an anarchic free for all, but rather a considered and theoried technique that specifically endeavours to produce a political response to the observed world and *status quo*.

THE DEATH OF HISTORY (OR THE DEATH OF CRITICAL INFORMATION SYSTEMS RESEARCH)

This article has presented the definitions of event scenes and the theoretical background regarding events. We provide an overview of existing research and commentary that focus upon the meaning,

significance and impact of “events” in the information technology, organisational and social contexts. Peterson’s (1998) literature review provides initial guidance in revealing the possibilities for a taxonomy of organisational events. In this way, we have developed the foundations for a critical debate regarding the relationships of events to organisations.

The argument presented here has demonstrated how the “event” as a method can capture multidimensional and multivocal forms of expression. We have shown how the examination of the event can form the basis for an appropriate, viable and useful information systems methodology. By focusing on the “event” the researcher or system designer can observe and capture the complexity, multiplicity and mundaneness of everyday lived experience. By utilising an “event” focus in IS research, we argue for the potential to reconstitute the mundane, the integrative blend of moments that constitute everyday life, the nonlinearity of experience, the illogic of expectations, the indeterminate acceleration and deceleration of personal temporality and the moments of the unexpected or unforeseen (Albright, 2003; Debord, 1994; Gergen & Thatchenkery, 2004; Peterson, 1998; Plant, 1997).

We have argued that utilising the event-oriented method, including elements of illogical asemiosis of experience, eschews the application of management process and articulates arhythmic patterns of life. The significance of the event-based approach to information systems development and research is that a nonlinear method challenges managerialist, structured and time-fixated praxis that currently dominate information systems research and development. The implication of our critique is that these existing popular approaches produce their own internal logic that obscures the

influences of power on people and “things” located and ordered within the system. The influences of historical materialism can readily be identified in the preference for current research approaches. Historical materialism presumes that what has preceded is the key relationship and source of understanding — the event, in contrast, is currently an under theorised enquiry. Such theoretical foundation means that systems developers expect and plan for information taken into a system to be altered in predictable *systematic* ways up to the final point of output, where they are released from the control of the system. However, from an event-based perspective, the purpose and use of the information within a planned system does not necessitate or provide any singular or fixed accumulation of meanings. Consideration of events and the role of less privileged users reduces the dominance of hierarchical and managerial views of the system. Ultimately, the political aim of an event-oriented perspective is to make those *in the system* the owners of that system.

Finally, what is being presented in the event and the event-scene is not a meta-method for information systems research but an attempt to incorporate the complexities of everyday life and the subtleties of political meaning into the sterility of systemic systems thinking. Event-oriented perspectives in information systems offer the opportunity to engage in *détournement* for the purpose of both understanding existing environments and contributing to the development of future systems’ “architecture.” The active engagement in re-engineering echoes the situationist’s own town planning and architectural experiments (Sadler, 1998). Rebuilding the component parts found in the *détournement* produces new, unexpected and politically challenging approaches to the mundane-

ity of everyday life. Information systems research, in contrast, has been recuperated from its inception. Its methods, philosophy and advocacy continuously return to questions of business efficiency, process improvement and time management. As information systems become increasingly domesticated, the continuous and automatic reiteration of these perspectives without debate or critique will merely serve to perpetuate existing mainstream regimes of power.

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